

THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

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CHOWCHILLA BEGINNINGS by ARCHIE E. MARSTON



Back in the Spring of 1844, John Fremont and his party were making their way across what is now Madera County. In Fremont's Memoirs we find recorded the following: "Continuing along we came upon broad and deeply-worn trails which had been freshly traveled by large bands of horses, apparently coming from the San Joaquin Valley. But we heard enough to know that they came from the settlements

on the coast. These and indications from horse-bones dragged about by wild animals, wolves or bears, warned us that we were approaching the villages of Horse-thief Indians, a party of whom had just returned from a successful raid." This brief mention of the "Horse-thief Indians" gives us an introduction, through the eyes of the white man, of the

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early inhabitants of the Chowchilla area.

The Chowchilla Indians, or more correctly Chauchila or Chaushila, lived along the several channels of the Chowchilla River in the plains region. According to one authority the Chowchilla tribe may well have been a very populous tribe; at least we know that they were a warlike one, for their name means "murderous" or "cruel" and it was a byword for bravery to the southernmost end of Yokuts territory in the southern end of the Valley. They were also known for their tendencies to steal horses, a vital necessity on the broad San Joaquin Plains.

It wasn't until the decade of 1850-1860, that permanent settlements began to be made in the area by the early immigrants to California. The Appling Family and their relatives located near and along the Chowchilla River at this time, along with Overton, Yancey, Frakes, Crooks, McCearry, Wood, to mention some of the names. These people generally engaged in raising stock - cattle, sheep and hogs.

These stockmen and farmers who settled the plains area of today's Madera County had followed the gold miners of 1849. But there were others interested in the region; men like Isaac Friedlander, a San Francisco capitalist, G.C. Bliss of the same city, and William Chapman.

One ranch which figures prominently in the story which we are endeavoring to unfold is the 26,000 acre ranch which was purchased in 1881 by G.C. Bliss from a man named Montgomery. Montgomery was the contractor who built the Southern Pacific Railroad through this part of the Valley. Before the close of the open range era, cattle ranching was the principle industry of the San Joaquin Plains. Cattlemen from the Bliss and other ranches would drive

the fattened steers together to Athlone and Minton for shipping to market. As many as fifty carloads of animals would be sent out in a day.

In the 1860's the Minturn Family settled on the Chowchilla River and planted about an acre of vines. From this meager beginning one of the largest vineyards in the State of California grew. It became known as the Sierra Vista Vineyard, and as many as 200 different varieties of grapes were cultivated on this 3,300 acre ranch. Two large wineries were built on the property and wine production on the ranch reached a high of 800,000 gallons annually.

Tom Minturn built a small adobe house on the bank of the Chowchilla River when he first arrived. In addition to the vineyard, he farmed grain and raised sheep for many years, taking his crops to Stockton by team to be placed on ocean-going ships. But, Mr. Minturn's interests did not stop there. He built a store and started a little settlement which still exists and is known as Minturn. His store became the headquarters for the ranchers for many miles around. The old timers tell of the poker games played in Tom Minturn's store. Gold coins were used in place of poker chips, and it wasn't a game for the timid, for the pots were big and on one occasion even a 3,000 acre ranch was lost.

The little community of Minturn continued to play a vital part in the social and economic life of the surrounding area for many years, even until the days when the town of Chowchilla came into existence in 1913.

A colorful legend has arisen over the years in the Chowchilla area of how the King of Spain made a grant of 108,000 acres of land which came to be called the Chowchilla Rancho. This land was supposed to have come into the possession of a man by the

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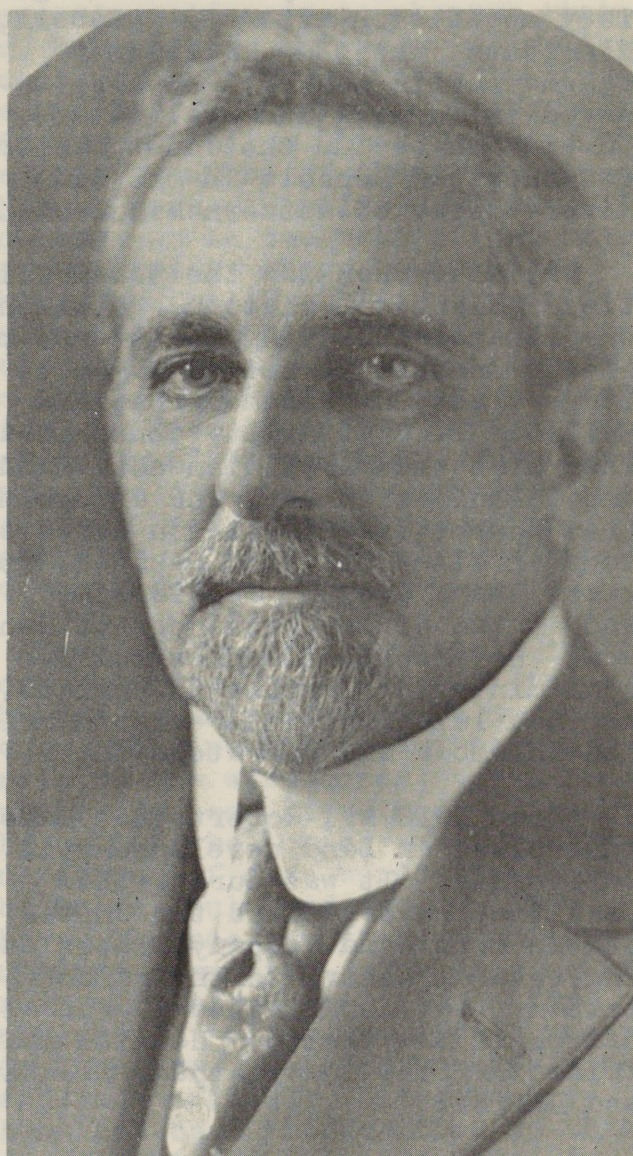
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name of Don Juan Smythe. He is said to have married Senorita Josefa Yorba on April 5, 1856. She was the daughter of wealthy land holder Don Antonio Yorba in Southern California (Fullerton). Mr. Smythe was supposed to have taken his young bride back to Chowchilla, and we have the charming stories of gay Spanish fiestas being held in the adobe home of this young empire builder. One thing is certain, a careful search at the Bancroft Library shows that no such land grant was ever made in the Chowchilla area.

But the growth of the Chowchilla area and subsequent development of the town does not need such fiction to make a thrilling but true story. From the days of the "killer Indians" and the struggles of the early pioneering families to the dreams of the wealthy "Father of Chowchilla" - O. A. Robertson, we have all the color and romance a student of history needs.

Wallace Smith in his book Garden of the Sun tells us some interesting things about land speculation and settlement in the San Joaquin Valley: "Perhaps the biggest real estate promotion project undertaken in the San Joaquin Valley was the work of William S. Chapman and his associatesabout 80,000 acres in Fresno County..... In 1916 the tax commissioner reported that 310 land proprietors owned 4,000,000 acres in the state. In the San Joaquin Valley four companies held a million acres. The Kern County Land Company alone owned 356,000 acres. In Merced County, Miller and Lux controlled 245,000 acres."

It is true that Chowchilla was only one of many communities established during the early years of the twentieth century by private colonization companies. But, judging from the above statement, the man largely responsible for the Chowchilla development was not a small operator.



Orlando Alison Robertson
"The Father of Chowchilla"

Mr. Orlando Alison Robertson was born in Prosperity, Pennsylvania, on August 18, 1858. Having lost his mother when only a small child, he was raised by an aunt on a farm near the place of his birth. By thrift and hard work he managed to secure an education, finally graduating from the California Normal School at California, Pennsylvania.

Not long after Mr. Robertson graduated from college he married
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Miss Frances Mackey of Pittsburg. They moved soon after to Campbell, Minnesota, where Mr. Robertson taught public school. He also engaged in farming and real estate. In time he became the County Superintendent of Schools in the Red River Valley of Western Minnesota.

Mr. Robertson saw the possibilities in land speculation, gathering the financial backing of several men in the community, and he began to buy large tracts of Northern Pacific Railroad land at ninety cents an acre. They were the First Minnesota Land and Colonization Co., and altogether they bought over a million acres of land in Minnesota, the Dakotas, Colorado, Utah, Oregon, California, and in two of the provinces of Canada. He also purchased extensive coal mining properties in England, and had lumbering interests in British Columbia and Saskatchewan.

About 1910 Mr. Robertson became interested in land development in California. It was during that year that he organized the United States Farm Land Company, later adding several others to the parent company, and established a general office in Sacramento. He also maintained offices in Winnipeg, St. Paul, and Denver.

With the purchase of the 44,000 acre Haggan Ranch, Mr. Robertson began to develop the North Sacramento area. In this area he created several parks, the Del Paso Park was one of these, and presented them as one of numerous gifts to the people of Sacramento. The balance of the land he divided into farm and city lots.

At the time that O. A. Robertson became interested in the Chowchilla area, he was estimated to be worth over four million dollars. By those who knew him, he has been described as a man of compelling personality and boundless energy.

He was also something of a philosopher and a dreamer, though a man of sound integrity. He thought that Chowchilla was ready for immediate development and held ambitious hopes for transforming the land into prosperous farms owned by happy people, and building a town of model proportions. He put all his money into the Chowchilla venture against the advice of his financial counselors, and, as we shall see, it cost him heavily.

On May 22, 1912, Mr. O. A. Robertson, President of the Union Colonization Co., purchased the Chowchilla Ranch from The California Pastoral & Agricultural Company, Limited, a corporation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, popularly called the "Scotch Company" because the heads of that company were a group of Scottish capitalists, led by John Clay, Sr. of Edinburgh. Over one-half of this ranch (known as the "east side") was divided into tracts for sale to farmers, and the north east corner of the property was set aside for the site of the town which became known as Chowchilla.

In 1917 Louis F. Swift, Chicago packer, purchased with Robertson roughly 40,000 acres of adjoining property, the Western Meat Ranch, which has since been operated as a cattle and farming operation under different managements. Then in 1919, 26,000 acres of the old Bliss Ranch were purchased by Mr. Robertson, the land again being subdivided and sold off in small tracts.

Mr. Robertson's ambitious plans soon began to be carried out. After the surveys were completed, and maps made, streets in the town site and about 300 miles of country roads were opened including the twelve mile Robertson Boulevard which was lined with palm trees. He had erected a large hotel and office

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buildings. Soon a town water system was put into operation, and street lights were put up. Later, some twelve miles of railroad was built, connecting with the Southern Pacific line, the purpose of which was to aid the settlers and expedite the new colonizing efforts.

October 15, 1912, was the date set for the grand opening of the colonization project. An extensive advertising program had been conducted and on that date some 4,000 people responded to the invitation to look over the land, see the rodeo and partake of the free barbecue lunch at noon. The day was hot and dry, and according to those present, the beans were salty. This caused many in the crowd to drift down to Tom's Saloon at Minturn to slack their thirst. That day is still remembered as the day Minturn went dry.

A young man by the name of Carl Dougherty opened the first store of the new community. It was housed in a tent, but a building was built in 1913, which also served as the location for the first library, run by Mr. Dougherty's Mother, Florence. His wife was Victoria Cardwell.

Mr. Robertson gave the land on which the first church was erected. The First Presbyterian Church was finished in 1913, and on September 11, of that year, the first grammar school was opened with classes being held in the church. Miss Belle Rodieneras was the teacher with thirty-five pupils. The first high school opened in the fall of 1915. The teacher and the dozen or so pupils met for classes in a room on the second floor of a store building.

By 1914 the Land Company had completed the division of the land surrounding the town into six school districts or subdivisions. The subdivisions were afterwards named Ashview, Alamo, Bethel, Chowchilla,

Central and Dairyland. It is an interesting sidenote to observe that Mr. Robertson's interest in public school education continued long after he had left the teaching profession. His generosity in this direction was seen in a number of the subdivisions when he gave financial assistance to them, as in the case of the Dairyland District, where he advanced three-fourths of the first year's salary to the new teacher. He also sold needed land at a reduced price to the School Boards. And, in addition, he gave liberally to the local community of Chowchilla. The town park, the district fair grounds, to mention a few, were gifts of Mr. Robertson to help establish his "dream town".

Some of the early settlers in the town and colonies can recall the thirty-six mule harvesters and the long jerk-line mule teams hauling grain to the warehouses, bells ringing on the lead teams and, of course, the drivers bellowing their continuous chorus of cuss words that only the mules could understand. For Chowchilla has always been an agricultural community. The raising of grain was the principal crop for many years. Of course cattle was the big industry. The farmers had vineyards and orchards, but gradually there has been a transition so that more dairying and cotton have become the basic industries of Chowchilla's economy, though this is definitely a diversified farming area.

As mentioned earlier, an extensive program of advertising was conducted by the United States Land Company on behalf of their colonizing venture. They enlisted agents of the Daniel Hayes Co. of Chicago and Ben Brainerd Co. of St. Paul who traveled through the mid-western states, but particularly in Illinois and those states immediately surrounding, encouraging farmers to move west to

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Chowchilla. They offered the land at a price of two hundred dollars an acre, which would be refunded if they were not happy with the deal. They gave the prospective customers a free round-trip train ride and all expenses paid to visit this "land of golden opportunity".

A good number of these mid-western farmers availed themselves of this opportunity to see the western half of the nation for "free". And many became the first among the early settlers. But in time, rumblings began to be heard, that they had been cheated by Mr. Robertson's company. They claimed the land had been guaranteed to be good farming land, but they had subsequently found alkali on the land, and this was before the days when agricultural experts knew how to deal with this kind of soil as they do now.

Suit was brought against Robertson and his company, and the cases were in the courts for several years. Finally, civil judgments were rendered in several cases, but no charge of fraud or dishonesty on Mr. Robertson's part was ever proved.

Mr. Robertson had much of his money tied up in his extensive land speculation ventures, and when the country began to experience the recession of the late 20's and early 30's, he became more and more pressed for funds. In short, when Mr. Robertson passed away on May 23, 1933, he had lost his vast fortune and died practically penniless.

It is a matter of historic information that there were basically five distinct kinds of communities which grew up in the San Joaquin Valley. There were the fur posts, gold camps, river towns, stage-coach stations and railway towns. Chowchilla, though it lies beside the main-lines of the Southern Pacific, hardly falls into any of these specific categories. It was, strictly speaking, not the outgrowth of a geographic or

economic need, but the result of the thinking and planning of one man - O. A. Robertson. It is true that the Chowchilla colonization project was not unique in California's history. Other small communities like Kerman, Wasco, Shafter, Patterson, Oakdale and Laguna de Tache were all the products of such private land company efforts. But taken collectively, they are all part of a unique story - the story of a group of far-sighted real estate promoters who saw the future of the San Joaquin Valley and its agricultural productivity.

From its modest beginnings, Chowchilla, being one of the younger cities of the San Joaquin Valley, has grown to a town of some 4,500 population, serving a surrounding population of some 9,000. The city was incorporated in 1923, and has had its share of growing pains, with still much to be done, but the dream of a growing, progressive town, that was the vision of Mr. Robertson has become a reality at last. Such was the contribution of this man who has rightly been called "the Father of Chowchilla".

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INDIAN PEAK by GERTRUDE HOPPER

It was the year of 1921 when John Hopper, a native Californian, and blacksmith by trade, moved from Santa Maria to take up a homestead at the foot of Indian Peak. About six years later Kenneth Hopper, his son, and I with our small daughter Thelma and Kenneth Junior, one year of age, left Honolulu, Hawaii, and filed on the homestead adjoining his father's.

We started to build a house and, when it was about half finished, an Indian by the name of Tom Gibbs rode over to inform us we were building on his mother's land. According to the old surveys the land was ours, but we found out later the lines had been resurveyed. The foundations had to be torn down and moved to the opposite side of Chowchilla River. Then we bought a cow and calf, two old mules from the Sugar Pine Co., and later, a mare and colt.

There wasn't a school in the neighborhood close enough for the children to attend, so all the neighbors collected enough money to buy lumber to build a school house and we gave them the land. When this was completed there had to be a dance to celebrate.

Invitations were sent out by word of mouth and everyone was soon looking forward to a good time. About four days before the dance, it started to rain and never stopped for the rest of the week. We did not expect anyone to come and were preparing for bed when there was a "Yip-ee" from outside, and it was about six people who had come all the way from Raymond on horseback. We dressed and joined them, but the river was so high by that time, we had difficulty in crossing.

What a surprise to find others had arrived from Mariposa and neighboring ranches. The musicians had

failed to make it, but someone had brought a fiddle and Jim Visser had a harmonica - so that was our music for the night. By twelve o'clock the river was so high it was impossible to cross. After a supper of sandwiches, cake and coffee, the dance continued until daylight.

Our ranching proved to be a failure due to inexperience and poor soil and Kenneth had to get a job as donkey engineer with the Sugar Pine Lumber Co. We moved to Camp 4 where we really enjoyed two summers in the mountains. By that time we were expecting a new arrival to our family and moved into Mariposa where Glen was born. When he was a month old, Kenneth was called back to Honolulu to his old job at the Honolulu Advertising Publishing Co.

Kenneth left the stock with his father and we never knew who took over our land.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The Madera County Historical Society is well into another year.

We were most pleasantly surprised to be given the use of two rooms in the basement of the "Old Court House" and are most grateful to the Madera County Board of Supervisors. We plan to use this space for storage, cataloging and research.

It is our hope to accomplish considerable in the next few months. Through our "Historian" and local papers we hope to keep you informed.

Chiefly, our big goal is to finally achieve a place where all may enjoy and appreciate the colorful history of Madera County - a museum for permanent exhibit.

MAUD E. LINDEMANN
PRESIDENT



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These beautiful old pictures are from the collection of Mrs. John O'Neal. At top we see The Madera-Crane Valley Stage stopping at the Spring Valley Store. Below is John O'Neal on the near wheeler driving his "Jerk Line" team. The O'Neal ranch house appears in the trees in the background.